

PRESS CONFERENCE

When to Hold a Press Conference

There are times when a press conference or media event is the best way to broadly deliver important information about your program to the press. They offer the potential for reaching multiple reporters from the broadcast, print, and trade press at a single event. Press conferences can be efficient and exciting. They heighten interest in the story and may even reinforce the natural competitiveness of the press, increasing the prospects of your story being covered. *But, all of this is predicated on having interesting, newsworthy, and timely information to announce.* If the event does not live up to its billing, reporters probably will not cover it, and it will be much harder to bring them out for a subsequent event. Therefore, consider the following points in deciding if you should hold a press conference:

- Is your story newsworthy, timely, and of interest to news-reporting organizations?
- Are there alternative means of delivering your message that would be equally or more effective?
- Does the press conference offer reporters special advantages, such as interesting visuals and hearing directly from experts, key officials, and other important figures?

Successful press conferences invariably involve a great deal of staff time and should not be undertaken without good reason. Even with a strong topic and story, it is not easy to secure press attendance. In part, this is because many print and broadcast outlets have limited staff. Therefore, to be fully effective it may require extra effort, such as substantial follow-up work to get your message to the members of the press who were unable to attend.

While there are no hard and fast rules for holding a press conference, some events that might warrant one are the announcement of the formation of a clean air coalition, the launch of a new public education/information program, announcement of receipt of a major grant to fund clean air activities, release of an important survey or study, or achievement of critical goals or milestones. A press conference also may be appropriate to respond to a crisis or to inform the press of a position your organization has taken on an important issue.

Where to Hold a Press Conference

Once you have decided to hold a press conference, you must determine where it should be held.

Some locations to consider include:

- Your headquarters or the office of one of your program partners
- An off-site facility that is easily accessible to the media such as a hotel or facility with special meeting rooms, or a local press club (if your city has one)

- A location that is directly related to the topic— an “on-the-scene” location. This might be a vehicle service station, a bus stop, or a school.

Certain needs will have to be met wherever the press conference is held. For example, the area must have space to accommodate the media and guests. If you expect television coverage, there should be sufficient space to set up cameras, and easy access to electrical outlets. The location also should accommodate audiovisual equipment such as screens, overhead projectors, microphones, and a “mult box,” an electronic device that allows several broadcast media microphones to receive a voice feed at the same time. Meeting rooms in popular locations are often booked well in advance; therefore, check on facility availability early in the planning process.

What Day and Time are Best for a Press Conference

When planning a press conference, the day of week and time of day are important considerations. In general, avoid Mondays and Fridays. Few reporters are willing to commit to a Monday event. Like many people, they prefer to begin the week in the office and often have meetings scheduled that day. Friday typically is a wrap-up day, with reporters and editors rushing to complete assignments against both the day’s and week’s deadlines.

It is preferable to schedule a press conference in the morning, because this offers the best opportunity for a full day’s coverage in broadcast media. It also reduces conflicts with afternoon print deadlines. When possible, a press conference should last no more than one hour and begin between 9:30 and 11:00 a.m. Respect deadlines. Start the event on time, even if few people are in attendance.

Weekend press conferences are not a good idea, because the media will have greatly reduced staffs. Further, it is generally difficult to reach weekend staff before the event, because many are not available during the week.

Who to Invite to the Press Conference

Your media “universe” depends on the size of your city. Obviously, the larger your area, the more print outlets, radio and television stations, and ancillary media will serve you. But all U.S. cities are served by some media outlets, and in most cases, the array is surprisingly large.

You may want to draw reporters from all media sources or focus on only some of them. Many public affairs professionals develop several targeted media lists, because it makes the job of sending out materials easier and more effective. For example, you may have a list of general mass media outlets such as television, radio, and daily newspapers. Another list may have environmental writers or trade press only. Whether you employ a single mailing list or multiple lists, the process for developing them is similar. See the “Media Advisory” in Tab I for more information.

How to Invite the Media to a Press Conference

The most common way to invite reporters to a press conference is with a media advisory. (See “Media Advisory” in Tab I for an example.) The advisory provides reporters with enough information to decide if they should attend the press conference, but not enough to make them feel they have the full story. If participants are available for interviews, state that in your advisory. Fax or mail the media advisory one week before the event to give editors time to assess the story and make decisions about coverage. In some cases, you may want to invite more than one person, such as a metro reporter and an environmental reporter. Both may have an interest in the story, but from different perspectives.

It is important to make follow-up calls a day or two before the event, for several reasons. First, faxes are notorious for “getting lost” and you may have to resend. Second, calling gives you an opportunity to sell the press conference to the reporter, and to ask if he or she is interested in scheduling an interview with your spokesperson(s) following the event. The goal is to generate interest in your topic. Finally, calling may give you an idea of how many people might attend the event.

The soonest most broadcast reporters will know if they will cover an event usually is the day before — and more often the day of the event. Even then, breaking news may draw broadcast outlets away. In those cases, calling a broadcast reporter after the event and offering a key participant for a phone or in-studio interview may result in a story.

What Materials to Give to the Media

Generally, you should distribute a press kit at a press conference or media event. Some key elements of a press kit include:

- A press release containing the key information presented at the conference
- Fact sheets or background materials that will amplify the content of the press conference, provide context, and give the reporter basic, factual information helpful to understanding the issue and developing a story
- Copies of any prepared statements, graphs, charts, or other substantive information presented at the conference
- Biography or background information on key spokesperson(s)
- Photographs of key spokespersons (if available) or other graphics to increase the possibility of a picture accompanying the story

Following the event, it is a good practice to messenger copies of the press kit to reporters who cover the topic but could not attend, so they can meet their deadlines.

Embargoed Material

Sometimes a reporter will ask you to give him or her the material being released before the press

conference. Perhaps the reporter has a conflicting assignment, yet wants to cover the story at the same time as his or her counterparts. You could provide an “embargoed” copy of your report or press kit, which simply means the story cannot be reported before a time you specify. Embargoed materials should be clearly labeled, such as “Embargoed until 11:00 a.m., Tuesday, May 7, 200X.”

How to Prepare Your Spokesperson for the Event

It is a good practice to have a primary spokesperson for your issue. That person should be well prepared for the event and ready to answer reporters’ questions. To help your spokesperson:

- Develop a brief statement — under 10 minutes is a good rule-of-thumb — and a set of “talking points” that focus on your key messages.
- Consider using visual aids such as poster-size charts or overheads. If you produce visuals, they should be clear and easily understood, and visible from any point in the press area.
- Anticipate questions and prepare clear, brief answers.
- Provide the statement, “talking points,” and Q&As to your spokesperson and anyone else who might be answering questions. (Note: Do not distribute talking points or Q&As; they are for internal use only.)
- Schedule a rehearsal. You may want to have several people there to give it the feel of the actual event, and you may want to videotape it to assess and improve the presentation.
- Decide how questions will be handled. If more than one person is involved in the presentation, it is a good idea to have a moderator who is knowledgeable about the participants and can call on the best person to answer each question.

Specifics of Planning the Press Conference

- Establish a budget. Among the possible costs:
 - Room rental, including furnishings such as chairs and a podium
 - Photographer and related photo costs
 - Press kit materials- production/printing/copying
 - Audiovisual needs and materials (e.g., banners, charts, slides, mult box, videos, phone hook-up for radio stations, etc.)
 - Refreshments, coffee, etc. *Tip: Don’t serve food, because it is a distraction rather than an enhancement.*
- Plan how you want the room set up and how the traffic should flow.

- Work beforehand with the person charged with setting up the room so you know where equipment will be, who will set it up, and when and who to contact if you have last minute “emergencies.”
- Develop signs to guide people to the press conference area.
- Make sure there is adequate parking, including reserved space for VIPs.
- Be sure the area is accessible for the physically disabled.
- Decide who will speak, the order of the speakers, and how long each will present. Determine who will introduce speakers and who will acknowledge dignitaries. *Tip: No speaker should take more than 10 minutes; total speaking time should be no more than 20 to 30 minutes.*
- If more than one person is presenting information, develop an agenda or program for attendees.
- Set up a registration table outside the press conference area. Have a knowledgeable person at the table to answer questions and hand out materials.
- Have two sign-in sheets at the registration table — one for the press and one for guests.

The Day of the Press Conference

- Arrive at least one hour before the event. This will give you time to attend to any last-minute matters. Speakers should arrive at least one half hour before the event and use the time to familiarize themselves with the facilities, attend to any last-minute details, and relax for a few minutes before the event begins.
- Assign someone the role of “greeter.” The greeter is charged with meeting guests as they arrive, directing them to the sign-in table, and seeing them into the conference area. The greeter should be able to answer any questions the guests may have.
- Start the press conference on time, even if attendance is sparse.
- An official should welcome the media and briefly mention why the press conference has been called. As suggested previously, that person should acknowledge VIPs and key speakers, introduce the spokespersons, and let the media know that these persons will answer questions at the conclusion of the presentation.
- Following the presentation(s), it may be appropriate for the moderator to *very briefly* summarize the key messages and then open the session to questions. The question and answer portion of the press conference should last no more than 15 to 20 minutes. The moderator should call on each reporter who has a question. *Tip: It is a good idea to ask*

the reporter to identify him or herself and the name of their organization. Often the moderator will repeat the question so that all can hear it. The moderator then designates the appropriate person to answer the question.

After the Press Conference

- Consider sending thank you notes to the VIPs who attended.
- Distribute press kits to key media who were unable to attend.
- Monitor the press for coverage.

PRESS CONFERENCE CHECKLIST

Facilities

Conduct a walk-through at the site before the event and the morning of the event.

- ☐ Site satisfactory
- ☐ Space adequate
- ☐ Security available
- ☐ Accessible for physically disabled
- ☐ Parking available
- ☐ Outdoors — grounds in good condition
- ☐ Visuals identified

Equipment

Test equipment before and on the day of the event. Allow time for replacement and know who to contact about equipment problems.

- ☐ Microphone/amplifier
- ☐ Podium
- ☐ Platform/stage
- ☐ Acoustics
- ☐ Visual aids (equipment, screens, easel, charts, etc.)
- ☐ Heat/air (where controls are/how to adjust them if necessary)
- ☐ Video/audio recording equipment, including mult box
- ☐ Seating arrangements
- ☐ Registration table
- ☐ Signage

Materials

- ☐ Sign-in sheets
- ☐ Name tags
- ☐ Tent cards, if needed
- ☐ Posters
- ☐ Press kits
- ☐ Pads and pencils
- ☐ Participant materials (including press kits, releases, etc.)
- ☐ Phone service, if needed

Staffing and Set-up

- ☐ Speakers
- ☐ Staff on hand and in place
- ☐ Photographer
- ☐ Refreshments